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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the premise that the abilities and talents of women in American society are being expressed only fractionally, the author suggests we take a look at our total culture in order to understand what is happening to women and men. Significant change needs to be far-reaching to make it possible for each individual to attain maximum potential development and to express this in satisfying ways. The author proposes that women should be allowed to choose to become, or not become, wives or mothers. The current and relevant societal pressures on women are examined. Arrangements such as part-time work and child care centers are viewed as helpful, but not as providing solutions to the basic problem of rigid cultural expectations regarding men and women. Literature on the learning of sex roles is cursorily presented and it is concluded that really basic changes would need to start with the training of young children. (TL)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY OF CHOICE IN WOMEN'S ROLES

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Our basic problem, it seems to me, is that the abilities and talents of women in our society are being expressed in only a fraction of the ways in which they might be, and that our society as a result is the poorer for it. The declining proportions of women in professional and semiprofessional roles, as compared with increasing proportions in other modern countries, is but one evidence of this; even when women do occupy such positions, they are reluctant to commit themselves to a lifelong career. Closely related are the many myths that women are unable to function well in positions of responsibility, or that they do not perform as well as men (Dornbusch, 1966).

My own point of view is that we need to look to the total culture in which we are living to understand what is happening to women--and to men--and that any change that is really going to make a difference needs to be very far-reaching. I think it is generally futile to talk about the "oppression of women by men" because both sexes are a part of our common culture; each is expressing the expectations of self and others which have been learned at an early age and reinforced repeatedly. Granted we in general think that men have greater freedom to determine their own destiny, to "transcend themselves," to use Simone de Beauvoir's term, but in reality they do not have much more freedom than women do. Think of an 8-hour job on an assembly line. However, their belief that they have this greater freedom is something of an advantage in itself (Limpus, 1970). Therefore, much of this discussion will be focused on women, although any change in women's roles will of necessity mean a change in men's roles also.

Speaking in terms of the present, I believe we want a society in which it is possible for each individual to attain maximum development of his or her potentials and to express these in a satisfying way. It should be possible for each woman to choose the role or roles she wants to fill, and not be forced into any which she does not choose to fill. This would mean that women would choose to become wives, but would also be free to choose not to become wives. Today the prevailing attitude is that a woman needs marriage to establish her identity.

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The pressures are varied, depending upon the particular segment of society one belongs to. Rainwater (1960), studying working class women, observed that there is no role available to a girl when she leaves the daughter role other than that of wife and mother, and once in the role of wife, she also feels a need to demonstrate her fecundity. Wyatt (1967) has expressed it in other ways--that a woman "needs affection in order to be endorsed," or needs marriage in order to "validate" herself. By-products of these pressures are the tendency for women to postpone crystallization of their own values so that they can adapt to those of their husbands, and to look upon education and training for a career on a "contingency" basis, something to be used--perhaps--at some time--if necessary (Angrist, 1969). Once married, being a wife is frequently regarded as the woman's primary career, although no one would say that being a husband is a man's primary career.

Such a change would also mean that some women would choose to become mothers, while others would choose not to become mothers. Why should we assume that nearly every female has equal potential as a mothering figure? And why, at a time when we are concerned about any increase in our population, and when an actual decrease is recommended by some, are there so many continuing pressures on women to have children? There is no question that the loving care and nurturance given our children is extremely important; as we have fewer children, we are going to be even more concerned that those we have are well cared for, and are reared under optimum conditions. It would seem far better if women chose this role. But when middle class and working class women were asked to describe a woman who did not want to have any children, they showed impressive agreement in using such terms as "totally self-involved, childish, neurotic, or in poor health" (Rainwater, 1965).

Even when a woman chooses to be a mother, finds great satisfaction in this role, and functions optimally, is there any reason to think of this as her life-time role? The majority of women are through with child-bearing in their twenties and see their youngest child off to school while they are in their thirties. If they continue devoting themselves to being fulltime mothers, it is far too easy for some to develop an unhealthy dependence upon their children as their "reason for being," which means that grown children are looked upon as sources of satisfaction which they can no longer provide.

It is difficult, however, for a mother to develop a new career at this stage in her life, or to continue one through her child-bearing years. Our cultural pressures are such that working mothers typically feel guilty about leaving their

children (Yarrow et. al., 1962), and feel that the family's economic need is the only valid justification for working (Hartley, 1960). Yet the evidence is that the children of working mothers do not appear to be any worse off, and even appear to benefit from it, particularly the sons (Farley, 1968).

It is quite possible that some women--some couples--are so expert at rearing children that it is to society's benefit to encourage them to continue in this capacity long after their own children are grown. We see this in some foster parents, couples who have become particularly expert as parents and want to continue. They relate to each other particularly well as parents, support each other in the parenting role, and show confidence and skill as well as sensitivity to the child in coping with a variety of difficult behaviors (Cautley et. al., 1966). They can provide much-needed care for children not their own.

Why cannot a woman be encouraged to express her own interests in work away from home, and to occupy several roles at the same time--that of wife, of mother, and of careerist? One of the important barriers would seem to be our emphasis on the nuclear family, in which so many of the instrumental tasks of "keeping the family going" (fed, clothed, and spotless) are traditionally those of the women (Rossi, 1968). The "overload", to use the Rapoports' term (1969), is considerable. Many questions can be raised about the institution of the nuclear family and the constraints it places on the activities of both parents (Birdwhistell, 1966; Winch, 1970).

Even within this tight boundary of the family, however, it would be much more possible for a woman to occupy these several roles simultaneously if two other provisions were more common--namely, the existence of part-time work, and the existence of good child-care facilities. It is difficult to understand the resistance on the part of so many institutions to part-time employment, because immediately a considerable reservoir of talented help would become available. My own experience, is that part-time work on the whole is probably more effectively done--certainly as effectively done--and with more energy and interest. But social agencies, where staff shortages almost always exist, and schools, where staff shortages existed until very recently, are examples of two kinds of institutions which have resisted this kind of hiring.

Child care centers as public institutions are still thought of as a service to be grudgingly provided only for the poor. But don't most mothers of young children need some relief? And isn't it desirable for children to have extra-familial socialization experiences as well? Possibly some of the resistance to

public day care centers stems from the cognitive dissonance introduced by the advantages of such centers, which are seen as conflicting with our culturally-instilled emphasis on the nuclear family and the responsibility of a mother to care for her young (Birdwhistell, 1966; Hoffman and Wyatt, 1960).

Arrangements such as part-time work and child care centers do not provide solutions to our basic problem, however, which seems to lie in the totality of our cultural expectations regarding women and men, with the fairly rigid definitions of the ways in which each is expected to function in our society. Evidence of the very deep roots of these definitions is to be found in the very early learning of sex-role differences in children. Goldberg and Lewis (1969) observed 13 month old babies with their mothers in a standardized situation and found striking differences between the boys and girls in their behavior toward their mothers and also in their play. The authors relate these differences to earlier observations of the mothers' behavior toward the infants and interpret these findings as evidence of parents' reinforcement of sex-appropriate behavior at very early ages. By the time they are five years old, boys and girls are well aware of sex-role differences (Hartley, 1964; Hartley and Hardesty, 1964), and by the time they are eight years old, both boys and girls believe that the male role has greater power and prestige (Kohlberg, 1966).

There are still unanswered questions about the effects of sex hormones on development and certain kinds of functioning, but we have sufficient evidence from cultural anthropology that sex role differences are in large part determined by culture, and are actually reversed in a few societies (Linton, 1942).

We know that sex-roles are primarily learned from adults in our society, through very complex social processes; there are still several theoretical points of view as to the precise mechanisms by which this is accomplished (Mischel, 1966; Kohlberg, 1966). "Playthings seem to be most clearly defined perceptually as indicators of sex roles in childhood" (Hartley and Hardesty, 1964, p. 50). The fact that there is a higher degree of agreement as to girls' toys than those of boys suggests that girls' toys "are characterized by more rigid tabus for the opposite sex" (Hartley and Hardesty, 1964, p. 50). And as girls grow older, participation in boys' activities is more permissible for them than is the reverse. Lynn (1966) suggests that even the methods of learning sex-typical identification are different: the girl learning primarily through a personal relationship and imitation and the boy through abstracting the male role mainly by negative directives--what is <u>not</u> appropriate. The result according to Lynn is that males

are "more anxious regarding sex-role identification" and "tend to hold stronger feelings of hostility toward females" (Lynn, 1966, p. 469-470).

If girls and boys, by the time they are eight years old, attribute greater power and prestige to the male role, it is not surprising that as adults the two sexes give evidence of a similar but much stronger evaluation of the relative prestige of the two roles. We see the lower self-esteem and self-confidence which women have as compared to men--their expectation of doing less well than men. Even when they perform the same job which is performed by men, it is regarded less highly simply because it is performed by women (Dornbusch, 1966).

Any basic changes would need to start with the training of young children; this seems clear. Along with the possibilities that come to mind--the provision of alternative role models, the determination to encourage play with all kinds of materials and toys, etc.--it also becomes clear that we need to be able to answer certain questions to which we do not presently have the answers: Is it possible to train children to function differentially in sex roles without at the same time according higher status to one than to the other? Is this what we want? Or do we want to eliminate sex differences except those dictated by physiological differences?

At the same time that we consider these questions I would like to call attention to some of the attributes of women which seem to me to be very important and desirable, particularly women's greater sensitivity to others, their concern with interpersonal relationships, their greater positive feeling for others, and of course the expression of nurturance (Classified Summary in Maccoby, 1966)--all of these are important qualities in any society focusing on human values. If, in addition, women contribute more effectively to group problem-solving under stress and also facilitate the functioning of others, these skills, taken together, are skills which we need. Could these be preserved or even maximized in our training of children?

While we talk about the desirability of changes, they are of course occurring--in the youth culture (Whittaker, 1969) and in the family (Winch, 1970). If we want to influence any of these changes, it is essential to understand the complexities of the system in which we are working, as any change in a dynamic system affects all the other parts (Michael, 1968; Alkire, 1969). We want to be sure that as we open doors in one direction, we are not closing them in other important ways, but that doors are opened to both sexes for a wider variety of roles and creative work, and that children are nurtured and reared under optimum

conditions.

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